

The situation of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) is increasingly a test of the broader human rights environment across Latin America. Although many constitutions and legal frameworks formally protect the right to FoRB to some degree, these freedoms are being weakened in practice by authoritarian governance, fragile rule of law, armed conflict and organised crime.

‘Freedoms, like privileges, prevail or are imperilled together. You cannot harm or strive to achieve one without harming or furthering all.’

- José Martí

In some countries, restrictions are driven by the state itself, with governments viewing independent religious voices as part of a broader civic opposition. In others, pressure comes from non-state actors, including armed groups and organised criminal networks that seek to control territory, silence community leaders and prevent faith-based organisations from supporting victims or exposing abuses.

In Colombia, Cuba, Mexico, Nicaragua and Venezuela, religious leaders and groups are increasingly being targeted because of their social influence and their ability to shape community attitudes, defend human dignity and support vulnerable communities.

Surveillance, intimidation and arbitrary detention are often used to restrict independent religious activity. These tactics form part of a wider pattern of pressure on religious leaders, religious organisations and those who refuse to align with official or criminal power structures.

In some countries, religion has also increasingly been co-opted by governments that claim to uphold FoRB while seeking to control religious messaging, festivals and institutions, by using selective favouritism and administrative pressure to project tolerance whilst narrowing the space for independent religious voices.

These FoRB concerns should therefore be understood as part of a broader human rights picture. Restrictions on FoRB have intersected with limits on freedom of expression, association and assembly; protection from mistreatment; political participation; fair trial rights; and the safety of human rights defenders. They also limit the ability of religious and belief communities to provide support, document abuses and contribute to reconciliation. The country sections that follow will set out how these regional trends play out in specific national contexts.

Colombia

In Colombia, FoRB concerns are closely linked to wider security and governance challenges, weak state protection and armed-group control of rural areas. Religious leaders act as peacebuilders and community advocates, making them visible targets for armed actors seeking to control political and social life.

Religious leaders across the country reported coercion and intimidation ahead of the 2026 presidential election. A pastor from Arauca Department reported that religious leaders in rural areas had received warnings from the National Liberation Army (ELN) guerrilla group aimed at preventing support for right-wing candidate, and now president elect, Abelardo de la Espriella.

Similar reports from Caquetá and Cauca Departments indicate that dissident factions of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) instructed religious leaders to warn congregations that votes would be monitored.

Since December 2024, CSW has documented 11 cases of religious leaders who have been assassinated, extrajudicially executed, forcibly disappeared or kidnapped in Colombia. This includes the killing of Pastor José Otoniel Ortega, who was shot dead by armed individuals during New Year’s Eve celebrations in the Santa Elena neighbourhood of Fundación Municipality, Magdalena Department.



Pastor José Otoniel Ortega.

CSW’s campaign calling on the Colombian government to restore security protections for religious leaders highlights the need for urgent action to protect faith leaders as human rights defenders and local peacebuilders.

The international community should press for Colombia’s new government to restore religious leaders’ access to the national security mechanism as a matter of urgency.

Cuba

Recent cases show continued pressure on independent religious leadership, especially where religious activity intersects with public expression or protest. Detention, questioning and intimidation of religious leaders and their families has reinforced a climate in which independent religious witness and criticism of the state are discouraged.

Government agents continued to prevent individuals associated with the Ladies in White from attending Sunday morning mass with, for example, multiple members of Iglesia Parroquial de la Purísima Concepción in Matanzas detained in January after leaving their homes and threatened with imprisonment upon release if they continued to attempt to participate in Sunday mass. In subsequent months, there

were fewer such detentions as members of the Ladies in White opted to attend religious services during the week, rather than on Sunday morning.

On 16 March Pastor Rolando Perez Lora was arrested in a park in Matanzas after recording and uploading a Bible teaching video to YouTube. He was released after 24 hours.

The following day, Pastor Elier Muir Ávila and his then 16-year-old son Jonathan David Muir Burgos were detained following accusations that they had participated in protests in Morón, Ciego de Ávila. Although Pastor Muir Ávila was released later the same day, Jonathan was transferred to a maximum-security prison for adults where he spent over three months in detention. He was released into house arrest on 24 June, following months of psychological and physical mistreatment and denial of medical attention for severe dyshidrosis and malnutrition.

In June Protestant Pastor Alexis Padrón Lorenzo was detained in Regla, Havana on accusations of public disorder. He has not been permitted contact with family since his detention, and there are concerns for his health due the fact that he has rheumatoid arthritis. He remains detained at the time of writing.



Pastor Alexis Padrón Lorenzo and his wife Roselin Benítez Cruz.

Afro-Cuban religious leaders Donaida Perez Pasiero and Loreto Hernandez Garcia, and Protestant Christian brothers Jorge and Nadir Martín Perdomo all remain imprisoned on charges relating to their alleged participation in the peaceful protests of 11 July 2021.

The international community should raise FoRB at every opportunity with the Cuban government and should press for adequate medical treatment and the immediate release of prisoners of conscience, Loreto Garcia Hernandez and Donaida Perez Paseiro as well as Pastor Alexis Padrón Lorenzo.

Mexico

Despite FoRB being formally protected in Mexico, enforcement is weak in places where local authorities or criminal groups hold power. Religious minorities face coercion, displacement or violence when refusing majority religious practices.

In January Protestant Pastor Mariano Velásquez Martínez and his family were forcibly displaced from Santiago Malcatepec, Oaxaca State after he refused to pray to an image of Saint James as part of the local Roman Catholic festival. He was detained for five days and brought before an assembly to be expelled.

Similarly, in March, Gustavo Gonzalez Vasquez, a Jehovah's Witness, was arbitrarily detained in Santa Maria following his refusal of a position in a Roman Catholic celebration, expelled from the community, fined 150,000-200,000 Mexican pesos and some of his properties were confiscated.

In March Protestant missionary Benito Guevara Arcos in the town of San Vicente, Chilpancingo de los Bravos Municipality, Guerrero State was forcibly disappeared by a criminal group. Neighbours reported seeing armed men force him into a car and take him away after taking exception to his preaching. Although the group responsible claims to have released him days later, he has not yet been found, despite extensive local media coverage.



Benito Guevara Arcos.

The international community should insist that Mexico address as a matter of urgency the culture of impunity around FoRB violations, and ensure that those responsible for criminal acts committed in relation to FoRB violations are made to account for their actions through the justice system.

Nicaragua

The government of Nicaragua continues to treat independent religious activity as a threat to its authority, using detention, surveillance and pressure on religious communities to restrict dissent and narrow fundamental freedoms.

The January 2026 release of Pastor Rudy Palacios Vargas and five of his associates after six months of detention highlights continuing surveillance after release. Having been arbitrarily detained on 17 July 2025 as part of a coordinated police operation, they were released to a combination of house arrest and precautionary measures. A seventh member of

the group, Mauricio Alonso Petri, died in detention in August 2025.

On 29 June Bishop Juan Abelardo Mata Guevara, the 80-year-old Bishop Emeritus of the Diocese of Estelí, was detained by the National Police at the San Juan Clinic, one day after he referred to religious persecution in prayers he led at a Mass at La Cruz del Calvario Church. Bishop Mata Guevara was sent to the El Chipote Maximum Security Prison in Managua and released at 6.45pm that evening, but was detained again the following morning and held until 4pm.



Bishop Juan Abelardo Mata Guevara.

On 30 June Deacon Wilfred Aráuz Rodríguez and Father Francisco Morales, of La Cruz del Calvario Church at which Bishop Mata Guevara had led prayers, and Father Rigoberto Delgadillo Sánchez of the Santuario Divino Niño Parish were detained and held for 12 hours.

Protestant Pastor Efrén Antonio Vílchez López continues to serve a 23-year prison sentence on unfounded charges. In May 2026 CSW submitted a petition signed by over 1,000 people and calling for his immediate and unconditional release to Nicaraguan embassies and consulates in 11 countries.

Roman Catholic priest Frutos Constantino Valle Salmerón has been under house arrest in Managua since July 2024 after he was prevented from preparing for the ordination of three deacons.

The international community should continue to press the Nicaraguan government to cease its harassment and targeting of religious leaders and to immediately release Pastor Efrén Vilchez López as a matter of urgency.

Venezuela

The removal from power of President Maduro has created political uncertainty in Venezuela, without dismantling the underlying structures that have constrained civic and religious life. Religious leaders are likely to remain under

scrutiny because of their local influence, keeping FoRB closely linked to the country's democratic and human rights future.

In June Bishop Dr. Jylman Red Jurado Farfan of the independent Latin American Anglican Church reported serious health concerns during his imprisonment at Rodeo III Prison in Miranda State. The bishop has experienced a campaign of harassment and restrictions on access to religious materials since his arrest in July 2021 on arbitrary charges of terrorism, criminal association and conspiracy. His overall health condition has been described as 'poor' by forensic specialists, who have warned possibilities of hypovolemic shock or cardiac arrest. Despite at least six court orders issued requiring his urgent transfer for medical evaluations, he remains detained by prison authorities.



Bishop Dr. Jylman Red Jurado Farfan.

The ELN has steadily expanded its operations from Colombia into Venezuela. In border states, the group has reportedly established de facto military control and has intimidated and coerced religious leaders into complying with its rules through threats of violence.

Protestant Pastor Gricelia Josefina Solórzano Malpica continues to serve a prison sentence on unfounded, politically-motivated charges of terrorism, embezzlement and conspiracy, for which she was arrested in June 2024.

The international community should engage with the current Venezuelan government to insist on strengthening and upholding protections for FoRB for all and to press for the immediate release of Bishop Dr. Jylman Red Jurado Farfan and Pastor Gricelia Josefina Solórzano Malpica and the expulsion of the ELN from its territories.

**CSW everyone
free to believe**